



The
Richard Bolitho
Newsletter

Issue VII



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Douglas Reeman / Alexander Kent
with *Cutty Sark* in the background.

Part One

Flagship

Throughout the Royal Navy's long and varied history, one belief has barely changed. Junior officers have always considered their own lot to be harder and more demanding than their immediate superiors, and that once they have taken the vital step up the ladder of promotion and seniority things will change for the better.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth century navy, aboard an overcrowded and disciplined man-of-war, that belief was even more positive, but then as now was very often wrong.

Youthful midshipmen, many packed off to sea at the tender age of twelve or less, while they were chased and harried by their lieutenants and betters, prayed for that unbelievable day when they would pass their exams and trade the gunroom's petty tyranny for the security and well-being of the wardroom.

The fortunate ones, having gained their commissions as lieutenants, were soon to discover that the responsibility which went with the uniform was far greater than they had imagined possible. Watched with amused contempt by the ship's seasoned sailing master, berated by their first lieutenant, they had to begin all over again. That big step from gunroom to quarterdeck also brought the captain into close and stark perspective. No longer the remote figure on the poop made almost godlike by distance, the captain was only too real



'The Inshore Squadron' by English marine artist
Geoffrey Huband

and always quick to trim his new subordinates down to size.

But with time and experience came confidence. The ability to stand watch in all but a full gale, determined to stay in control and avoid calling the captain on deck for advice or to assume command. It was a long and uncertain climb for most lieutenants. The rules were few but well-tested. Never mistake foolhardiness for confidence. Never put pride before safety when the ship was standing into danger. Not least, *never* offend the captain.

As with most young men however, the more they learned, the greater the problems they overcame, the more certain they became that could don a captain's epaulette and do *his* work with equal panache. *Given the chance.*

It rarely occurred to many of them that once

alone, aft in his great cabin, their lord and master had only his own resources to sustain him. To share a doubt with even a trusted subordinate could provoke uncertainty at the very moment of peril. Gun-to-gun in the bloody business of close action that same officer might look aft to his captain and find himself doubting the leadership and example he desperately needed.

The daily routine aboard ship, promotion and punishment, the distance sailed, the assessment of ability or the discovery of incompetence, all eventually arrived on the captain's table. For his was the final responsibility whatever happened. Reward and honour came to the fortunate ones, but courts martial and oblivion were too common for complacency.

And what of the captain of a flagship? Surely from time to time as his admiral took his daily stroll on poop or quarterdeck he must have felt a touch of envy, the same old belief that he could command not just this ship but the whole squadron or fleet?

In those years of almost continuous war and unrest, the navy's admirals, the flag officers, were hard put to protect the trade routes and blockade the enemy's fleets without stretching their ships and men to the limit.

While the ponderous ships-of-the-line tacked back and forth outside some hostile port or estuary, or rode out a storm in any sea from the Atlantic to the Caribbean, the flag officers who commanded their destinies fretted about news and the ability to obtain it from any and every source.

With sea distances so great and the time taken for vessels to move from one point on a chart to another, intelligence reports and despatches were often out-of-date before they had left the Admiralty or some other naval headquarters.

Most information came via passing merchantmen and coastal traders, and this was often more reliable than that which filtered from embassies and consulates abroad.

Either way, the admiral concerned could never afford to ignore it. He had to weigh each piece of news and then act on it. He might discover to his cost that ships destroyed by his command, or shore installations laid in ruins by landing parties of his marines, were in fact those of a country now friendly to Britain when they had been at war when he had last heard.

Every fleet was short of frigates, the admiral's eyes and teeth. Faster than anything heavier, and heavier than anything faster, they were the vital link between some far-off, unidentified sail and the ship which proudly flew the admiral's own command flag.

It is worth mentioning, I think, that when a large fleet was at sea it was common to have several admirals in command of smaller squadrons within it.

It was essential for the captain of some courier-brig or schooner, outward bound with important despatches for the senior officer, to be able to recognise the flagship concerned. Even more so was the ability to identify her in the heat and din of battle. A small hoist of signal flags could make all

the difference between victory and disaster.

An admiral's flagship was identified by his flag being flown at the mainmast. A vice-admiral flew his flag from the foremast, and a rear-admiral, the most junior, hoisted his at the mizzen.

At night, the senior officer showed three lanterns above his taffrail, the second-in-command two, and every other vessel one. In addition all flag officers displayed a lantern from the rear of the maintop. These were known as top-lights, the term was also used as naval slang for eyes.

An admiral had to be able to sum up a situation before it happened. Once engaged with an enemy force it took far too long to manoeuvre his ships to best advantage so he had to bear every possibility in mind. To keep his ships where they controlled the largest area, to retain the wind-gage and hold a potential enemy to leeward, these things were rarely far from his thoughts. Unlike his captains he could no longer concern himself with the men who crewed his ships. They were part of a whole, the fleet in being, which by his example and skill could be forged into a single and effective weapon.

Only when the guns began to roar and the sea's face became masked in dense smoke would the admiral, be he very senior or a newly appointed rear admiral, know if he had acted wisely, or if within hours he would see his hopes, like his ships, scattered and in chaos.

Whatever the outcome, the flag officers of those harsh but stirring times had to share their success or failure with the lowliest sailor and the youngest midshipman around them. An admiral was always

a prized target for the enemy's marksmen in the fighting tops, for just as his flagship had to be recognised at all times, so must he show an example without flinching.

Several famous admirals were to die in combat in such a fashion. At the Battle of the Nile in 1798, the French Admiral Brueys continued to direct the conduct of his fleet although legless and with the stumps bound in crude tourniquets while he perched in a chair on his quarterdeck. His agony ended only when his great flagship *L'Orient* was blasted apart when a magazine caught fire. Seven years later, the little admiral who had beaten him and destroyed his fleet was to fall to a French sharpshooter as he walked the deck of the *Victory* at Trafalgar.

How many historic events have begun, I wonder, with an agitated lieutenant reporting to his captain, 'Signal from the *Flag*, sir!'

If the true feelings of the man who had ordered such a signal to be hoisted had been known, it is doubtful if many would have envied him his power, and his flagship.

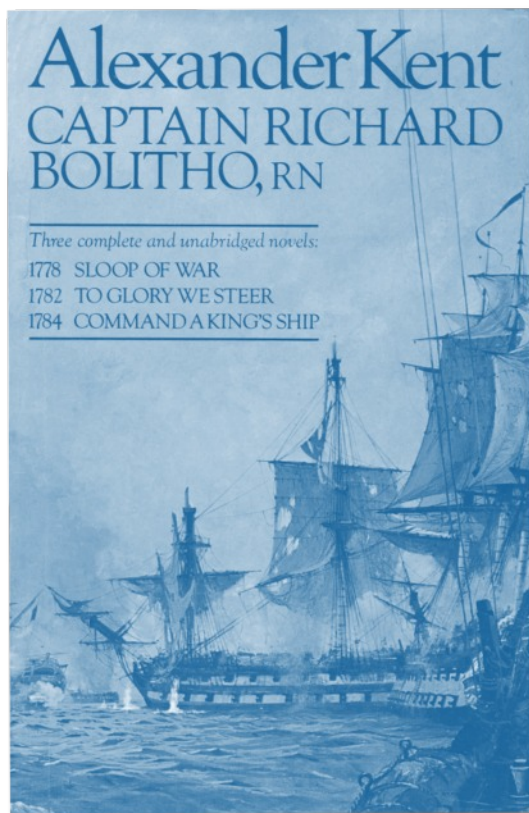
Part Two

Author's introduction

From *Captain Richard Bolitho*, RN ...

Omnibus containing *Sloop of War*, *To Glory We Steer*, and *Command a King's Ship*

It is a particular pleasure for me to have these three Richard Bolitho stories brought together



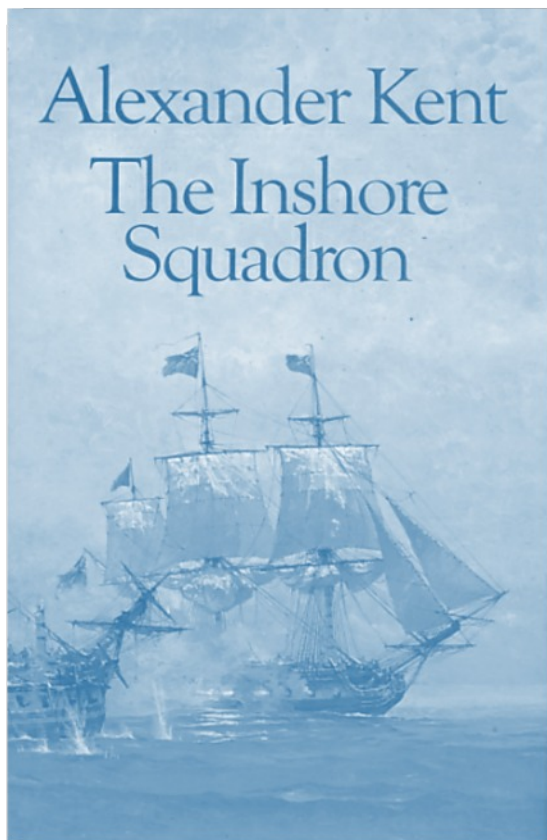
into one volume. They span only six years in Bolitho's life, but those years were the ones in which he learnt what it meant to carry the responsibilities of command – of command of ships of war at sea for months, and sometimes years, on end with little or no direction from any superior authority. These were times when an ally could become an enemy almost overnight and when the total weight of decisions that might precipitate a major conflict – or even a war – could

rest on the shoulders of a young naval captain.

Today it is extraordinary to think of this: to realise that a naval officer in his early twenties would be in command of a thirty-two gun frigate, far from the main fleet, and responsible for a ship's company of about 200 men, many of whom would be seasoned veterans old enough to be his father.

This volume contains the first Bolitho story which was published in 1968. However, this is not the first in the chronological sequence of Bolitho's career. When I conceived Bolitho I felt that the stories would remain fresher – and possibly present a greater challenge to me – if they were written out of order. In this way I hoped to vary the plots and, equally importantly, the backgrounds to the stories; there are now twelve published books dealing with Bolitho's life from 1772, when he was a midshipman on the *Gorgon*, to 1798, when he was promoted commodore.

One of the books in this omnibus is, as I have said, the first Bolitho story to be published: *To Glory We Steer*. The others are *Sloop of War* and *Command a King's Ship*, and the three stories are now chronologically arranged. *Sloop of War* opens in 1778, the year in which Bolitho takes command of the *Sparrow*, a small, fast and well-armed sloop, and has as its climax the Battle of the Chesapeake off the eastern seaboard of North America. *To Glory We Steer* is set during the last years of the American War of Independence, when as a junior captain Bolitho is ordered to take his frigate *Phalarope* to the Caribbean. *Command a King's Ship* again has him in command of a frigate, the



Undine, but in this book the main setting is the East Indies – at that time a little known area where there is no set line of battle or declared cause to rally a ship's company.

Together the three novels cover the years from 1778, the date of his first independent command, to 1784 – the years in which the young Bolitho is

tested to the full and during which he is moulded to achieve the senior ranks of flag captain, squadron commodore, and rear admiral in other stories.

Part Three

The Inshore Squadron

Acclaimed as 'one of our foremost writers of naval fiction' (*Sunday Times*), Alexander Kent has gone from strength to strength since his first Richard Bolitho Novel appeared ten years ago. Fine storytelling, careful attention to historical background and sweeping scenes of naval action account for the world-wide success of his books. *The Inshore Squadron* is the twelfth Richard Bolitho story and chronologically it follows the events covered by *Signal – Close Action!*

In September 1800 Richard Bolitho, a freshly appointed rear-admiral, assumes command of his own squadron – but, as the cruel demands of war spread from Europe to the Baltic, he soon realizes that his experience, gained in the line of battle, has ill-prepared him for the intricate manoeuvring of power politics.

Under his flag, the Inshore Squadron has to ride out the bitter hardship of blockade duty and the swift, deadly encounters with the enemy. An old hatred steps from the past to pose a personal threat to him, but at the gates of Copenhagen, where his flag flies amidst the fury of battle, Bolitho must put all private hopes and fears behind him.

Part Four

Author's Note

Looking back over the ten years of Richard Bolitho's stories I am often amazed at the way he has taken over my life. I feel more like his aide or respectful secretary than his author, and after all this time I am still learning about him and discovering new sides to his nature.

I know from the many letters I receive and from the varied suggestions and inquiries which come my way that others may see him differently, or identify with characteristics which interest them most. About half of the letters I get are from women. There seems to be no age barrier, and I am in regular correspondence with some very senior citizens as well as young girls who are still in school.

Good or bad, the eighteenth-century was the melting-pot of the world we now know. Perhaps Richard Bolitho strikes a spark of romance, or mirrors a time, which if hard and demanding was also one of gallantry and honour.

Of course I hear from people whose lives are or have been closely bound to the sea. Merchant seamen, yachtsmen, naval men of all ranks and of several nations. Only this year during a tour of South Africa I was made an honorary member of the tug-masters' association, although I suspect that I was only 'standing in' for Bolitho.

When I begin a story I rarely know more than the historical and factual background. Bolitho

seems to have a will of his own, and I have to watch closely in case he should change the plot as it progresses! I get to know his ships, his officers and seamen, much as I learned to understand sailors of my own time and generation.

Sometimes when the evening is quiet, and I have finished work for the day, I find myself looking at one of the old naval swords or relics which share my home with me, and wondering. About a man who held such a sword, who lived and died in a world like Bolitho's. What was he really like, what were his hopes and fears?

When I am on one of my research trips, especially around the seaports of this country, I am very aware of the characters who play such a part in my life. Around Plymouth, or walking down a lane in Cornwall I can picture them without effort. Herrick and young Pascoe, Allday with his lazy smile and an eye for the wenches, and of course Bolitho himself.

Abroad too, in Tahiti, or along the restless coastline of Brittany I sometimes imagine I can see a far-off pyramid of sails, or sunlight reflecting from a raised telescope.

I no longer imagine for an instant that I created Richard Bolitho. I believe he found me, and for that I am very grateful.

